In praise of Catholic nuns’ leadership
By Nick patricca
March 6, 2011

Thursday, Feb. 10. I’m listening to Shelia O’Brien, Justice of the Illinois Appellate Court, tell me why my story of being an American and a Catholic is important.

We American Catholics, Justice O’Brien says, as she marches back and forth on the platform of Loyola University’s Klarchek Information Commons, have important things to say to the men dressed in showy Renaissance gowns who issue rules and decrees from on high and haven’t a clue.

Cassie, a Loyola undergraduate, is sitting next to me. She is listening to Justice O’Brien and texting on her smart phone. I lean over and ask Cassie to find out if Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has resigned yet. He hasn’t.

As if reading my mind, Justice O’Brien launches into her call that we take back our church just as the Egyptian people are taking charge of their own country and destiny.

I ask Cassie why she is attending this conference on “Women Shaping the Church.” She says her dad asked her to say ‘hello’ to Sister Simone Campbell, another presenter, who baby-sat him when he was a child. I survey the audience: most of us are over 55; most are women.

Friday, Feb. 11. I’m participating in a memorial mass for my Mundelein-Loyola colleague, English Professor Michael Fortune. We are having a grand time remembering Michael and celebrating over 40 years of friendship and learning. Kateri, another colleague from my Mundelein days, leans into me and says, “Isn’t it grand to be a Catholic? We have such great fun at a wake.”

I survey the gathering for Mike’s memorial. Again, we are mostly women and mostly elderly. And, we are great fun.

Saturday, Feb. 12. Mubarak has resigned. Facebook, the Internet, Twitter, the World Wide Web and cell phones have made a revolution. A new paradigm: virtual social networks for social change. Not violence, not knitting needles, not guillotines, not the model of the French Revolution.

Sunday, Feb. 13. I have joined my friends and colleagues at the last mass at the chapel of the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary (commonly known as the BVMs) at Wright Hall, their retirement residence on the Mundelein-Loyola campus.
This closing of Wright Hall, along with the closing of Mundelein College in 1991 when it affiliated with Loyola, marks a significant juncture in the history of the BVMs in Chicago.

The BVM community, like most congregations of sisters in the United States, is having financial and recruitment challenges.

To add to this bleak landscape, in January 2009 the Vatican bureaucrats instituted an official investigation of American nuns.

Some say this investigation is a smoke screen to deflect attention from the festering issue of pedophilia among the male clergy.

The BVMs were visited by the ‘Apostolic Visitators’ in November 2010. The Visitators make a report to Rome (not shared with the nuns) in which they can recommend the suppression of an order or the appointment of an outsider administrator, among other scary alternatives, or a clean bill of health. The results of this visitation are not yet known.

This stellar group of nuns, who had achieved so many firsts in the history of the U.S. as well as in the history of Catholic women religious, is marking this change in their Chicago presence in a quiet, simple ceremony of great dignity. Our median age is over 75; our mean probably the same. There is one high school student present, male.

After the homily in the mass, Sister Mary Healey reads the intercessions that she has written for this last mass.

That people of the Middle East who are agitating for freedom of speech will soon achieve all the freedoms which are human rights, we pray to the Lord . . .

That political candidates will be clear and accurate in all they say about their own objectives and their opponents’ so voters may safely judge them, we pray to the Lord . . .

For print and broadcast journalists to be aware of their own preferences and prejudices so they can present only facts to their audiences, we pray to the Lord . . .

That legislators on all levels will pass unambiguous laws that will save time for judges and money for taxpayers, we pray to the Lord . . .

For the group composing the report on the apostolic visitation of religious women in the United States to find the words to explain our life and mission to men of a different culture, we pray to the Lord . . .

For our BVM leaders who have been so open in preparing us for the closing of Wright Hall and making the transition, we pray to the Lord . . .

In the heady days of the 1960s, the Catholic Church was one of the most vital institutions in the nation. Its lay people, its thinkers, its nuns and clergy were shaking and shaping the very foundations of our culture. John F. Kennedy had been elected president. The American Jesuit John Courtney Murray was in Rome instructing cardinals and Vatican bureaucrats at the Second Vatican Council on the virtues of religious liberty, pluralism and other democratic values.
Chicago’s own Carol Frances Jegen, a BVM sister, Jack Egan, a diocesan priest, and Peggy Roach, a lay woman, were in the front lines of the struggle for civil rights. Ann Ida Gannon, BVM, president of Mundelein College, was a national leader in education and advocate for the equal role of women in forming society.

The whole world saw in the American Catholic Church signs of hope for a better future.

I am a male of our species and I do not own a smart phone. But I believe Justice O’Brien. I know what Catholic women have achieved in the past. I see what they are doing in the present. I know they will find a way to our future.

_Nick Patricca is professor emeritus of theater studies at Loyola University Chicago._